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## Spenser's Praise of Mercy at Duessa's Trial in *The Faerie Queene*, Book V

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### Abstract

Among the books of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Book V, the Legend of Justice, is the least popular among modern critics; mostly because it contains controversial political allusions pertaining to Spenser's days. The episode of Duessa's trial is a typical example. Spenser alludes to Mary Stuart as Duessa and allegorises Elizabeth I as Mercilla, who presides over the trial, to emphasise Elizabeth's mercifulness towards Mary. Unlike her name, Mercilla has the power to decide Duessa's execution, which means that Spenser depicts her not only as an incarnation of mercy but also as an ideal monarch who possesses both justice and mercy. This gap widens when he proclaims that it is "better to reforme, then to cut off the ill" (V.x.2.9) to emphasise the superiority of mercy over justice, which is set before the death of Duessa. To close this gap, Spenser identifies mercy with justice and tries to treat Duessa's execution as a merciful act by Mercilla. Moreover, Spenser argues that what should really be "cut off" is not an evil person but a conception of evil, and he seems to adopt this idea in the episode. Spenser's praise of mercy reveals the possibility that he accepts executing an evil person under the name of mercy. However, his intention remains ambiguous because the historical allegory is loaded with double meanings.

### Key words :

Edmund Spenser (エドモンド・スペンサー), Didactic Education for Gentlemen (ジェントルマンへの訓育), Defence of Elizabeth I (エリザベス一世擁護), Historical Allegory (歴史的寓意), Justice and Mercy (正義と慈悲)

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### 1. Introduction

Edmund Spenser designed his renowned epic romance *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) to teach "vertuous and gentle discipline" to gentlemen by "historicall fictions". This general purpose of *The Faerie Queene* is described in a letter to Sir Walter Raleigh inserted at the end of the 1590 edition of the text:

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えんじょう ゆり：淑徳大学 人文学部 兼任講師

The generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline: Which for that I conceiued shoulde be most plausible and pleasing, being coloured with an historicall fiction, the which the most part of men delight to read, rather for variety of matter, then for profite of the ensample: (714-15)<sup>1</sup>

Spenser declares that the main reason he uses historical allegory is for the readers' pleasure. In doing so, he follows Sir Philip Sidney's argument in *An Apology for Poetry* (1595) that the end of poetry is "delightful teaching" (112).<sup>2</sup> While Sir Thomas Elyot tries to teach the virtuous manners of an ideal monarch through practical instructions in his courtesy book *The Book Named the Governor* (1531), Spenser adopts Sidney's theory and tries to show moralistic instructions as delightful fictions.

However, when he treats contemporary events as "historical fictions" in *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser often abandons the readers' pleasure and treats the stories as political propaganda. In particular, Book V of *The Faerie Queene*, the Legend of Justice, is too political to "delight" modern readers.<sup>3</sup> In his discussion of "historical allegory", Michael O'Connell argues that "an almost obsessive desire to celebrate and defend the policies of Elizabeth comes over the poem as the Legend of Justice moves toward its conclusion. Historical allegory is the result" (13). A. C. Hamilton also points out that Spenser depicts justice in Book V as Elizabeth's justice. This, according to Hamilton, is shown in Spenser's description of the titular knight as "*thy Artegall*" in the proem of Book V (*The Faerie Queene* 13). These arguments show that Spenser treats Book V as political propaganda to teach Elizabeth's policy to gentlemen.

The episode of Duessa's trial (V.ix.38-50)<sup>4</sup> in particular works as propaganda to defend Elizabeth. Spenser alludes to Mary Stuart as Duessa and Elizabeth as Mercilla, who presides over the trial. These allusions were especially noticeable to his contemporaries. In this episode, Spenser depicts Mercilla as an ideal monarch and tries to defend Elizabeth's mercifulness towards Mary, but there is a clear inconsistency between her merciful nature and the distinctly unmerciful execution of Duessa. The more Spenser emphasises her mercifulness, the more the gap between her name and her cruel conduct widens. Because history cannot be altered to fit in with the author's didactic intentions, Spenser seems to have trouble converting it into fiction in this particular episode. This paper will highlight Spenser's struggle to repackage Mary's execution as historical fiction in order to justify Elizabeth's decision to his contemporaries.

## 2. Monarchical Mercy Distinguished from Pity

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The second part of *The Faerie Queene*, including Book V, was published in 1596, nine years after the execution of Mary Stuart. Mary was still a dangerous topic of discussion even after her death. Although Spenser never refers to her name in *The Faerie Queene*, James VI of Scotland clearly recognised the trial of Duessa as being that of Mary. Because of this episode, James prohibited the publication of *The Faerie Queene* in Scotland and sent a petition protesting against its publication to the English court. A Scottish diplomat named Robert Bowes wrote to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, about James' objections in 1596, the year of Book V's publication:

The K[ing] hath conceaued great offence against Edward Spencer publishing in prynte in

the second book p[ar]t of the Fairy Queene and ixth chapter some dishonorable effects (as the k. demeth thereof) against himself and his mother deceased. (Wells 45)

According to Richard McCabe, James complained of insults not only to his mother but to himself, and he also calculated how Spenser's work had affected the debate over succession (224). James was clearly outraged that Spenser had dared to write about this event given the severity of the situation.

The problem of succession related directly to the religious controversy of the time between Protestants and Catholics. Since Pope Clement VII had forbidden Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon in 1534, most Catholics refused to recognise his second marriage to Ann Boleyn. Moreover, because Elizabeth was Boleyn's daughter, her succession was considered illegitimate by many Catholics. On the other hand, Mary was a Catholic, and was regarded as Henry VII's legitimate great-grandchild (Neill 194). As a result, Mary was seen as a dangerous cause of civic discord by the majority of England's Protestants. After Mary abdicated the Scottish title and came to England, Parliament began to demand Mary's execution. These historical events are reflected in this episode. Here, Duessa is called an "vntitled Queene" who aided and abetted the "wicked driftes" (V.ix.42). The demand to execute Mary by Parliament intensified in 1572, the year after the so-called Ridolfi plot, although on this occasion Elizabeth decided to spare her life. According to McCabe, Elizabeth's decision to save Mary produced a conflict between the queen and her Parliament. He points out that "the general opinion in 1572 was that Elizabeth's 'pity' had led her to make a serious political mistake for which the nation would one day pay dearly" (234). In this context, Parliament declared again that "to spare her again were but unadvised and cruel Pity" when the execution of Mary was discussed in 1586 (Camden 376). From the Protestant point of view, saving Mary's life would be a "cruel pity" for Elizabeth's subjects.

Pity was seen by contemporaries as being distinct from mercy, which was perceived as a virtue of an ideal monarch. In *The Book Named the Governor*, Sir Thomas Elyot claims that the virtuous monarch should be merciful but must not confuse mercy with "vain pity":

And if ye ask me what mercy is, it is a temperance of the mind of him that hath power to be avenged, and it is called in Latin *clementia*, and is alway joined with reason. For he that for every little occasion is moved with compassion, and beholding a man punished condignly for his offence lamenteth or waileth, is called piteous, which is a sickness of the mind, wherewith at this day the more part of men be diseased. And yet is the sickness much worse by adding to one word, calling it vain pity. (119)

According to Elyot, a merciful monarch can judge an offender correctly with reason and is not moved with compassion. On the other hand, the person who feels pity in an accurate judgement suffers from "a sickness of the mind", which should thus be avoided. In this context, Parliament insisted that Elizabeth's decision to spare Mary's life was not mercy but "cruel Pity". Spenser also depicts pity as a wrong feeling at Duessa's trial. When Duessa appears at Mercilla's court, observers feel "great compassion" for her because of Duessa's "rare beautie" (V.ix.38). However, after an orator named Zele accuses her strongly of many crimes "with sharpe reasons", the people who felt "pitie" for her "abhorre and loath her person" because of Zele's strong accusations (V.ix.39). Prince Arthur, who observes the trial with the titular knight Artegall, also changes his mind after Zele sends witnesses named Murder, Sedition, Incontinence, Adulterie and Impietie to the court:

Then brought he forth, with griesly grim aspect,  
 Abhorred *Murder*, who with bloudie knyfe  
 Yet dropping fresh in hand did her detect,  
 And there with guiltie bloudshed charged ryfe:  
 Then brought he forth *Sedition*, breeding stryfe  
 In troublous wits, and mutinous vprore:  
 Then brought he forth *Incontinence* of lyfe,  
 Euen foule *Adulterie* her face before,  
 And lewd *Impietie*, that her accused sore. (V.ix.48)

According to Hamilton's notes to the stanza, the additional five advocates testify that Duessa is Mary: Murder represents the murder of her husband, Henry Darnley, and Sedition represents her involvement in plots to overthrow Elizabeth's government, such as Babington's plot in 1586. "Adulterie" represents her marriage to the Earl of Bothwell, who was widely believed to be Darnley's killer. "Incontinence of lyfe" and "Impietie" recalls the House of Commons' charges against her; namely, that she "hath heaped up together all the Sins of the Licentious sons of David, Adulteries, Murders, Conspiracies, Treasons, and Blasphemies against God" (577). After Arthur hears their pleas, he discards the feeling of pity, which is expressed as "his former fancies":

All which when as the Prince had heard and seene,  
 His former fancies ruth he gan repent,  
 And from her partie eftsoones was drawen cleene. (V.ix.49.1-3)

Arthur even repents his "ruth" after he realises that his former feeling for Duessa was wrong. Spenser, like Elyot, treats pity negatively as a temporary affection. Furthermore, pity is personified as one of Duessa's advocates (V.ix.45.3). In this line, "Pittie" is a deceitful character "with full tender hart" who takes Duessa's side and misleads the observers; including Arthur.

In this episode, mercy is clearly distinct from pity. While mercy is allegorised as Mercilla, the chief executive of the trial, pity is treated as a wrong feeling and is personified as an advocate of Duessa on the other side. To make a clear contrast with "Pittie", Spenser emphasises Mercilla's authority as a monarch. Mercilla is called "my souerayne Lady Queene" by her maid Samient, with whom Prince Arthur and Artegall go to Mercilla's palace (V.ix.20). In her palace, they see Mercilla sitting on her golden throne. This throne is "all embost with Lyons and with Flourdelyce" (V.x.27.9), which are also depicted on Elizabeth's coat of arms of England and France (Heale 139). In addition, Mercilla is described as a judge with a sceptre:

Thus she did sit in souerayne Maiestie,  
 Holding a Scepter in her royall hand,  
 The sacred pledge of peace and clemencie,  
 With which high God had blest her happie land,  
 Maugre so many foes, which did withstand.  
 But at her feet her sword was likewise layde,  
 Whose long rest rusted the bright steely brand;  
 Yet when as foes enforst, or friends sought ayde,  
 She could it sternely draw, that all the world dismayde. (V.ix.30)

The rusted sword represents Mercilla's mighty power. She is shown not just as a merciful lord but one who is able to enforce military power when necessary. According to Hamilton, her sword indicates "the emblem of royal power", and its state of "long rest rusted" refers to the Rising of the North in 1569 (about twenty years before the publication), in which nearly 700 Catholic rebels who rose against Elizabeth in support of Mary were killed (537). When Duessa's guilt is decided by unanimous consent (V.ix.49), Mercilla is described as below:

But she, whose Princely breast was touched nere  
 With piteous ruth of her so wretched plight,  
 Though plaine she saw by all, that she did heare,  
 That she of death was guiltie found by right,  
 Yet would not let iust vengeance on her light;  
 But rather let in stead thereof to fall  
 Few perling drops from her faire lampes of light;  
 The which she couering with her purple pall  
 Would haue the passion hid, and vp arose withall. (V.ix.50)

Although Mercilla never changes her judicial decision, she does shed tears. At Duessa's death, Spenser here describes Mercilla as a virtuous monarch who has mercy but not pity. He also refutes the opinion of Parliament that Elizabeth's pity for Mary would cause civic disorder by representing Elizabeth as a powerful yet merciful monarch.

### 3. Spenser's Praise of Mercy Identified with Justice

At the beginning of Book V, Canto x, Spenser compares justice to mercy before finally emphasising mercy's superiority. After the description of Duessa's trial, Spenser inserts a discussion of mercy's nature:

Some Clarke doe doubt in their deuicefull art,  
 Whether this heauenly thing, whereof I treat,  
 To weeten *Mercie*, be of Iustice part,  
 Or drawne forth from her by diuine extreate.  
 This well I wote, that sure she is as great,  
 And meriteth to haue as high a place,  
 Sith in th'Almighties euerlasting seat  
 She first was bred, and borne of heauenly race;  
 From thence pour'd down on men, by influence of grace.

For if that Vertue be of so great might,  
 Which from iust verdict will for nothing start,  
 But to preserue inuiolated right,  
 Oft spilles the principall, to saue the part;  
 So much more then is that of powre and art,

That seekes to saue the subiect of her skill,  
 Yet neuer doth from doome of right depart:  
 As it is greater prayse to saue, then spill,  
 And better to reforme, then to cut off the ill. (V.x.1-2)

Spenser shows “some clarkes” discussion as to whether mercy is a part of justice or is instead drawn from justice by divine extraction. He then concludes that mercy is as great as justice and has as high a place as justice. Spenser emphasises the equality between justice and mercy without concluding the discussion of mercy’s nature in the first stanza. In the next stanza, Spenser concludes that mercy’s power and art is superior to justice. While he explains that “that Vertue” (i.e., justice) which has a great power involves the risk of destroying “the principall” to save the part, mercy is much better than justice because it seeks a way to save “the subiect of her skill” within the range of the “doome of right”. Finally, in the last two lines, Spenser proclaims mercy’s superiority over justice: “it is greater prayse to saue, then spill, / And better to reforme, then to cut off the ill”. These two lines intensify the contradiction between the nature of mercy and the episode of Duessa’s execution. If it is really better to reform than to cut off the ill, why, then, did Mercilla decide to “cut off” Duessa’s head?

Spenser praises mercy concisely in the last two lines quoted above, which refer to Mercilla’s nature, but his argument is distant from the unmerciful treatment of Duessa. In this episode, Spenser actually fails to depict Mercilla as an incarnation of mercy because of this inconsistency. To close the gap, Spenser follows Parliament’s logic of 1572, while at the same time he rejects their insistence that Elizabeth’s mercy towards Mary was misguided. The treatment of Mary Stuart was discussed in Westminster, and the Commons adduced reasons “to proue the Queens Majesty bound in Conscience to proceed with Seuerity in this Case of the late Queen of Scots” during the session (D’Ewes 207). Among the reasons, they insisted that executing Mary was God’s Providence, and Elizabeth should be just to conduct the execution. To persuade the queen, they cited examples from the Bible. One example was David. After introducing the episode of “Traiterous Son” Absalom, whose death is lamented by David in the second book of Samuel, the Commons explained that this episode showed “*Dauid* having this infirmity of too much Pity and Indulgency towards Offendors, which is not of any Prince to be followed” (D’Ewes 210). They criticised David’s pity for his enemy and commented that it was not suitable for a prince. Here, pity is attacked as an inappropriate feeling for a sovereign. Furthermore, the Commons adduced the example from the books of Kings of “two wicked Queens” named *Jesabel* and *Athaliah*, who were executed by “Gods Magistrates”. They then argued that a monarch should be not only be merciful but also just, after the example of the two queens:

We find also in the Scriptures that in this Zeal of Justice two wicked Queens, *Jesabel* and *Athaliah*, both inferior in mischief to this late Queen, have been by Gods Magistrates Executed, and the same Execution commended in Scripture.

*Obj.* It may be further objected that the Queens Majesty in so doing should exceed the limits and bounds of Mercy and Clemency.

*Resp.* Indeed a Prince should be merciful, but he should be just also. . . .

The Prince in Government must be like unto him who is not only amiable by Mercy, but terrible also by Justice; and therefore is called *Misericors & Justus Dominus*. Mercy oftentimes



sheweth it self in the Image of Justice; Yea and Justice in Scriptures is by God called Mercy, *Psal.* 136. *Who Smote Egypt with their first-born, for his mercy endureth for ever. . . .*

Therefore as the Queens Majesty indeed is merciful, so we most humbly desire her that she will open her Mercy towards Gods People and her good Subjects, in dispatching those Enemies that seek the confusion of Gods cause amongst us, and of this noble Realm. (210)

According to this passage, Elizabeth's mercifulness and clemency restrict her just decisions on matters such as the executions of evil people. However, because a monarch is "not only amiable by Mercy but terrible also by Justice", her justice is called Mercy by God. The Commons insisted that, because mercy was shown as the image of a justice, they identified the monarch's mercy as justice. They finally concluded that "dispatching those Enemies" should be a merciful act for "Gods People and her good Subjects". In other words, their opinion offered the idea that Mary's death could be seen as a merciful act for the English subjects. By following this logic, Spenser interprets Mercilla's cruel execution as a kind of merciful behaviour. He actually represents both justice and mercy in the allegorical figure of mercy. In the next stanza, Mercilla's subjects admire her justice and mercy:

What heavenly Muse shall thy great honour rayse  
Vp to the skies, whence first deriu'd it was,  
And now on earth it selfe enlarged has,  
From th'vtmost brinke of the *Americke* shore,  
Vnto the margent of the *Molucas* ?  
Those Nations farre thy iustice doe adore:

But thine owne people do thy mercy prayse much more. (V.x.3.3-9)

Mercilla's influence reaches as far as the *Americke* and the *Molucas*, which indicates that her tremendous power goes beyond the domestic nation. In this description, the words "thy iustice" show that Mercilla is not only merciful but also just, which overrides her natural characteristics of mercifulness. Spenser justifies Mercilla's just acts by following the Commons' logic of "mercy called justice".

Nevertheless, there still seems to be an inconsistency in Spenser's argument that it is "better to reforme, then to cut off the ill" (V.x.2.9), because Duessa is not "reformed" but killed by Mercilla. How, then, does Spenser reconcile Mercilla's merciful nature with her act of "cutting off" Duessa? There is a clue in his colonial propaganda, *A View of the State of Ireland*. This is composed as a conversation between Irenius, who represents the New English, and Eudoxus, who represents an Englishman. In this work, Spenser endorses the use of royal power to control the "savage" Irish people. This treatise seems to have been completed and circulated in 1598, two years after the publication of *The Faerie Queene* (*A View*, xi). Irenius suggests that the best way to control the Irish is by using the sword, and he justifies this as follows:

*Eudox.* Is not your way all one with the former in effect, which you found fault with, save onely this odds, that I said by the halter, and you say by the sword? What difference is there?

*Iren.* There is surely great, when you shall understand it; for by the sword which I named, I did not meane the cutting off all that nation with the sword, which farre bee it from mee,

that I should ever thinke so desperately, or wish so uncharitably, but by the sword I meane the royall power of the Prince, which ought to stretch it selfe forth in the chieftest strength to the redressing and cutting off. Those evills, which I before blamed, and not of the people which are evill. For evill people, by good ordinances and government, may be made good; but the evill that is of it selfe evill, will never become good. (93)

Here, Irenius accepts that cutting off the nation or its people is cruel and uncharitable, but he also insists that using the sword and “cutting off all that nation” is quite different. According to him, the object to be cut off is not evil people but evil itself. Irenius observes that evil people can be reformed if the evil is cut off. However, considering the idea that it is “better to reforme, then to cut off the ill”, this sentence is still problematic. Because Duessa is an allegorical figure, it is difficult to discern whether she is merely an evil person or the evil itself. Considering Mary’s execution by Elizabeth, “the ill” alludes to “the evill person”, which reveals the possibility that Spenser accepts “cutting off” a person by a just hand as “mercy”. Spenser’s use of historical allegory is one of his strategies to depict controversial contemporary political events. Here, he leaves the interpretation of “the ill” (whether the evil itself or the evil person) in the readers’ hands. Although, as stated in his letter to Raleigh, Spenser’s primary objective is teaching moral virtues to gentlemen using “an historical fiction”, he adopts it as an instrument to hide his radical political opinions. He defends Elizabeth’s “cutting off” Mary by depicting her as Mercilla and praising her mercy. That is, Spenser’s praise of Elizabeth’s mercy is used to justify her cruel execution as a just behaviour.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this episode of Duessa’s trial, Spenser portrays mercy as a noble virtue and pity as a sickness of mind. As has been discussed, this is because Spenser was opposed to the view of Parliament in 1572 that Elizabeth had shown too much pity on Mary Stuart. Spenser instead defends Elizabeth by praising her mercifulness. However, there is an inconsistency between Mercilla’s merciful nature and her treatment of Duessa. Spenser tries to bridge this gap by following the logic of the Commons. According to them, the ideal monarch is a person who has both justice and mercy, and God sometimes calls justice mercy. For this reason, Mercilla is described as a merciful and mighty monarch. *In A View of the State of Ireland*, Spenser argues that the best path to successful reformation, is to cut off the evil by the sword, but what should be cut off is not evil people but the evil itself. Considering his argument that it is “better to reforme, then to cut off the ill” (V.x.2.9), Spenser seems to confirm the opinion stated in his pamphlet. However, considering the episode of Duessa’s trial, Spenser seems to justify Duessa’s execution by Mercilla, which suggests that Spenser accepts “cutting off” the evil person. Because Duessa is an allegorical figure, readers cannot define whether she is an evil person or the evil itself. Here, Spenser skilfully uses the double meaning of a historical allegory, and he ultimately leaves the interpretation of his “historical fiction” to readers.



## Notes

1. A. C. Hamilton's Longman edition of *The Faerie Queene* is used for the citations in this paper.
2. Spenser had connections with members of "Sidney circle". For details of their relationships, see "Sidney circle" in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*.
3. Spenserian critics argue that Book V is the least popular of all the books; mainly because it is too close to Spenser's colonial experience in Ireland (Spenser moved to the Munster plantation in southern Ireland around 1580). C. S. Lewis points out that "Spenser was the instrument of a detestable policy in Ireland, and in his fifth book the wickedness he had shared begins to corrupt his imagination" (349). In *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, Michael O'Connell also explains that "the Legend of Justice has been for many modern readers the least-liked book of *The Faerie Queene*. Partly because of its subject matter and partly because it comes closest to Spenser's own political experience in Ireland" (280). For details of Spenser's Irish experience and its influence on his works, see Andrew Hadfield's *Edmund Spenser's Irish Experience* and Richard A. McCabe's *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*.
4. References to *The Faerie Queene* are indicated in parentheses. The reference order follows Book, Canto, stanza and line.

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